**Cliques**

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All adolescents are confronted with a host of challenging concerns. There are academic performance issues and conflicts with parents about clothing and curfews. Often, there are worries about money and paying for their education and the extras that are needed. Then, there are decisions about the future, and, of course, about one’s social life. It is hard for adolescents to face all of these issues.

In the ideal world, teens would be able to spend lots of time discussing these issues with their parents. But, often, parents live fragmented lives. They may be working long hours while simultaneously caring for the needs of aging parents. Feeling that their last bit of energy has been sapped by so many responsibilities and demands, they may have little ability to attend to the on-going crises of the teen years. Plus, teens may consider their parents to be a little out of touch with the times, and they may prefer input from their peers.

So, not surprisingly, many teens gravitate to cliques or tightly interconnected circles of friends. These are classmates who share interests and values. They fill emotional voids. There are probably at least a few cliques in just about every middle and high school. The larger the school, the greater the number and diversity of cliques. Teens turn to the members of their clique for advice and support. Adolescents spend their free time with them. Cliques are the best sounding board if teens are having problems with their teachers or parents. Members of cliques will listen and be accepting.

In the midst of the sometimes-impersonal school environment, cliques give adolescents a feeling of belonging and profound acceptance. During the often-taxing adolescent years, that sense of connection may be quite important and help one cope. Clique friendships may give an adolescent the motivation or confidence to try something new such as an intramural sports team or a more demanding class in school. Or, they might inspire a teen to volunteer some of his or her time at a local shelter or soup kitchen or raise money for an important cause.

People will tend to pre-judge teens by the clique they have joined. There are many different types of cliques. Some of these include both male and female teens. The student body mentally ranks cliques. As in the past, high schools are generally dominated by the jocks and their cliques. The cheerleader cliques used to be as popular as those for the jocks. But, perhaps because females have their own sports teams, in many schools, that is no longer always the case. Still, there may also be cliques for other teens such as preppies, skateboarders, druggies, and serious students. Not to be forgotten, are the cliques for the outsiders—those on the margins of high school such as the white surpremacists. One can usually identify clique members by the way they dress. Throughout the U.S., these dress codes are remarkably similar. When a teen is a member of a clique, the teen and the other members become “us.” Everyone else is “them.” And is not unusual for those who are “in” to be less than kind to those who are “out.”

Not every teen wants to be a member of a clique. But many do. Nevertheless, they may not be accepted. Teens who are rejected from a clique will feel saddened and alone—like an outcast.

Members of the different cliques meet in various areas throughout the school. Each clique has its own turf. Thus, one clique might gather in a certain hallway. Another might sit at a certain bench. These areas are jealously guarded. At the beginning of the school year, freshmen students may unknowingly sit in a clique’s area. They will be quickly ordered to leave. And, there is generally no crossover between the various cliques. Once a member of a clique, that is usually where one will stay—unless the teen commits some egregious offense or if he or she comes to the realization that they no longer wish to be associated with certain people. When that happens, the rejection and ostracism may be rather dramatic and painful. Still, if an adolescent has been a member of a destructive or negative clique, then he or she will benefit from a permanent break.

Tension between the various cliques is not uncommon, especially between the cliques at the various ends of the spectrum. So, jocks frequently taunt members of the outsider cliques. And the teens that consider themselves outsiders have been known to respond with acts of extreme violence, such as that which took place in Columbine High School in the spring of 1999. During the bloodbath, which was perpetrated by two students, rumors spread that members of one clique, the “Trench Coat Mafia,” were after jocks, who wore polo shirts and white baseball caps. In response, many of the jocks removed clothing that would identify their clique status.

All too often, by excluding, teasing or tormenting other teens, cliques serve a negative function. They may turn non-members into scapegoats. Usually, among females, there is verbal abuse, which may be extraordinarily hurtful. Among males, the abuse may be verbal, but it is frequently also physical.

It is important to draw a distinction between cliques and gangs. Like cliques, gangs offer an emotional bond. But gangs, which are even more controlling than cliques, seem to be cliques taken to the extreme. Members of gangs view fellow members as family. Secrets are kept within the gang. And their turfs are not confined to the school building. Instead, they dominate streets and neighborhood areas. And gang activity is often delinquent and violent. Once in a gang, teens tend to have problems with the other parts of their lives. They may sneak out of their home at odd hours, and their grades will begin to drop. Since they will want to emulate the other members of the gang, they may suddenly wear a new style of clothing, often to the dismay of the parents. And, they may come home sporting the same tattoo worn by other gang members. Fortunately, while cliques are ubiquitous, gangs, especially outside the large urban areas, are relatively uncommon.